

Lee-Obama Summit: Solidifying a Joint Approach toward Pyongyang by Ralph A. Cossa

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The upcoming Washington summit meeting between ROK President Lee Myung-bak and U.S. President Barack Obama provides a golden opportunity for the two allies to send an important message to North Korea, to their other Six-Party Talks interlocutors, and to domestic constituencies in both countries regarding how best to deal with the ongoing North Korean nuclear crisis. There are other key items on their agenda, of course, including the articulation of a joint vision statement to take the U.S.-ROK alliance into the 21st century and the development of a joint approach to spur recovery from the global economic crisis, with an emphasis on how the agreed upon (by previous administrations in both countries) but not yet ratified Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement will help in this regard. But nothing is more important at this stage, in light of continued North Korea provocation, than sending a clear and unequivocal signal that Seoul and Washington are in lock step when it comes to dealing with Pyongyang.

The Obama administration has yet to spell out its North Korea policy in detail but the basic fundamentals, shaped by the North Korean long-range missile and nuclear tests which were used to greet the new U.S. president, are coming into focus and can best be articulated and expanded upon jointly by the two presidents directly.

The first and most important message for the two presidents to reinforce is that neither the U.S. nor the ROK accepts North Korea as a nuclear weapon state and that normalization of relations will remain impossible until such time as Pyongyang verifiably gives up its nuclear weapons. Their unshakable mutual goal is the complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

They should also endorse and reinforce the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) message that Pyongyang's current actions are unacceptable and that it must return to full compliance with all appropriate UNSC resolutions and directives if it is to enjoy the full benefits of being a member of the international community. In the meantime, both the ROK and U.S. will honor and enforce all binding resolutions and will take steps to augment current economic sanctions if they prove to be insufficient to persuade Pyongyang to change its errant behavior. A jointly announced and implemented targeted financial sanctions package will demonstrate their combined seriousness to Pyongyang, as would their challenge to Beijing (among others) to follow suit.

These measures are not aimed solely at punishing North Korea – although punishment is and should be part of the

consequences for past violations – but most importantly to ensure that whatever nuclear capability or materials currently exist in North Korea stay in North Korea and do not find their way into the hands of other states or nonstate actors who might be inclined to use them against the U.S. or its friends and allies. The U.S. and ROK – and the UNSC – should more clearly warn Pyongyang that if nuclear weapons or materials are transferred to another state or other entity, that there will be a commensurate and credible response, to include the possible use of force.

Washington has already clearly articulated but both should reinforce that the U.S. will “do what it must to provide for our security and that of our allies” (as U.S. Special Envoy Stephen Bosworth recently asserted) and that neither the alliance itself nor the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea will ever be on the negotiating table with the North – the fate of the alliance (including troop dispositions and command arrangements) is for the two alone to decide.

In this regard, both presidents need, once and for all, to make a clear determination as to whether operational control (OPCON) of ROK forces will revert to Seoul in 2012 as currently planned (my preference) or if this decision will be revised or at least reviewed. The continuing debate on this issue among conservatives in the ROK is distracting and potentially demoralizing and disrespects the ROK's ability to take the lead in its own defense, provided the U.S. nuclear deterrent remains in place (and the Obama administration has gone to great lengths to provide reassurance that this is in fact the case).

The Obama administration should also carefully consider if additional force deployments may be necessary to reinforce its defense commitment to the ROK (and Japan), perhaps including the temporary deployment of F-22 stealth fighters to Korea or the movement of B-2 stealth bombers to Guam (or closer) – not to threaten Pyongyang but to remind it that any hostile act of aggression on its part would be met with a “clear and appropriate response.” Conversely, the two presidents should reinforce Special Envoy Bosworth's recent assurance to Pyongyang that “we have no intention to invade North Korea or change its regime through force,” provided, of course, that Pyongyang similarly refrains from hostile actions.

Refraining from a “regime change by force” policy does not equate to endorsement of the Kim Jong-il regime (or its heir-apparent, for that matter). The two presidents should make it clear that their support for, and willingness to work with, the current or any future North Korean regime is and will continue to be contingent on that regime's demonstrated willingness to give up its nuclear weapons capabilities in return for positive security assurances (in advance) and economic assistance (upon proven compliance with past and future agreements). While both have echoed the UNSC's call

for an unconditional return to negotiations, they need to remind others (and themselves) that the Six-Party Talks is not the objective, but merely one possible means of achieving the long-term goal, which remains complete Korean Peninsula denuclearization – I stress *Peninsula* here since the U.S. and ROK should be equally transparent in assuring the North that there are no nuclear weapons based (or being developed) in the South either.

Presidents Lee and Obama should express their willingness to resume nuclear negotiations within the context of the Six-Party Talks but make it clear, as Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently exclaimed (at the Shangri-La Dialogue in late May), that they are “tired of buying the same horse twice.” By my count, we have bought the North’s nuclear facilities at Yongbyon three times; the fourth payment must be a final one, after true (already paid for) disablement and in return for complete dismantlement and elimination as called for in previous (at least partially paid for) agreements.

They should also repeat the pledge initially made by their more distant predecessors (Presidents Bill Clinton and Kim Young-sam) that the U.S. will enter into no negotiations dealing with the future security of the Peninsula that do not also involve the ROK – this does not preclude direct bilateral U.S.-DPRK negotiations on denuclearization or normalization issues but does preclude any return to the old 1994 Agreed Framework format where Washington and Pyongyang bilaterally reached an agreement that Seoul (and Tokyo, among others) then were expected to help finance. The North still seeks to isolate and marginalize the South and President Obama, like his predecessors, needs to state unequivocally that this is simply not going to happen.

The two presidents also need to help close the glaring loophole inherent in prior approaches to Pyongyang. Recall that in 2006, the UNSC imposed a series of sanctions against Pyongyang in reaction to its first nuclear test only to turn a blind eye toward enforcement once the North returned to the Six-Party Talks. Pyongyang no doubt assumes that whatever measures are put forth in response to its most recent (or planned future) missile or nuclear tests will likewise be ignored once it decides to come back to the negotiating table. Washington and Seoul need to reaffirm that new and existing sanctions will remain in place until Pyongyang at least honors its prior commitments, beginning with the acceptance of the previously negotiated (by then-Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill) but now denied verification protocol in support of the October 2007 “action for action” denuclearization implementation agreement; the U.S. part of that bargain – the removal of North Korea from the State Sponsors of Terrorism List and lifting of Trading with the Enemy Act restrictions – was accomplished by President Bush before he left office, which once again demonstrated the danger (and folly) of payment in advance to the North.

The two presidents understand, and should acknowledge, that future North Korean provocation is likely. As a result, they should announce the beginning of joint consultations (preferably with the Japanese as well) regarding next steps that they will, and that the UNSC should, take if and when future violations of UNSC resolutions occur. These should include at a minimum mandatory enactment and enforcement of financial

and other economic sanctions not just until Pyongyang rejoins six-way talks but until it comes into compliance with all existing resolutions, which include under UNSCR 1718, the complete, verifiable, irreversible elimination of all North Korean nuclear weapons programs.

To repeat and reinforce my earlier point, Pyongyang does not currently – believe much less fear – UNSC or unilateral sanctions regimes because it does not believe they will be enforced or assumes they will immediately be dropped once it returns to the bargaining table, even if it is there in bad faith, only to repeat the previous cycle of reward, promise, more reward, then renege and start again.

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice (or three or four times), shame on me – the current cycle must be broken. This can only be done through agreement by all UNSC members (and especially China and Russia, which have been the principle foot-draggers thus far) but it must start somewhere. What better way to begin than with concerted action by Washington and Seoul (and preferably Tokyo as well)? If they can raise the bar, than perhaps the lowest common denominator ultimately reached with Beijing and Moscow will be high enough to finally appear credible to Pyongyang.